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SUBJECT: SENEGAL: Local Election Campaigning Heats Up

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the run up to the March 2009 local elections, Poloff and Pol Assistant travelled to Kebemer, Louga and Saint Louis to observe various candidates on the campaign trail. The stakes are high for both the governing and opposition coalitions as these elections will define where these groups go from here until presidential elections slated for 2012, increasing or decreasing the President's ability to manage his succession. The opposition is accusing the governing coalition of massive fraud and vote buying. The President is violating election rules by campaigning (euphemistically dubbed an "economic tour") for his coalition's local candidates. He has encountered hostile, rock throwing crowds in several places. The opposition has promised to respond harshly, including through violence, to any attempts at fraud. End summary. Note. This cable reports information gathered prior to the March 15 local elections. The results are being tabulated and have not been reported as of the writing of this message. End Note.

St Louis - Action Aplenty

¶2. (SBU) Campaigning in St Louis is going full steam ahead with candidates on the streets from morning until midnight and money being spent aplenty in this key battleground city. Pitted against one another are the governing SOPI ("Change" in Wolof) coalition lead by incumbent Mayor, Minister of Decentralization Ousmane Masseck Ndiaye who has the support of four Ministers on his party's list; the Benno coalition led by the dynamic parliamentarian and IV alum Cheikh Bamba Dieye; and Ahmath Fall Braya. Braya is a deputy from the governing Democratic Party of Senegal (PDS) who set up his own list after he was not placed high enough in SOPI's list. Like Bamba Dieye, Braya is a local boy who came up through his party's ranks. A Braya victory can be put in SOPI's win column.

¶3. (SBU) According to St Louis 1st Deputy Mayor, Ayda Mbaye, who is a member of the opposition Democratic League (LD) and third on Benno's proportional list, the PDS is spending an enormous amount of money to win the election. She said, "In my neighborhood of Bango they are paying between CFA 50,000 (USD 100) to CFA 100,000 (USD 200) to families." However, she claimed attempts to buy voters will not succeed because people have told her they intend to take the money but still vote for Mbaye.

¶4. (SBU) According to Mbaye, "Ousmane does not dare go [into her neighborhood] himself. They are not even trying to campaign on his achievements because he was never here and he has none. Half the projects he claims he has done have not even been completed and he knows I know this because I ran the city while he spent all his time in Dakar. That's why he refuses to debate me in an open forum." She continued, "Ousmane Ngom (the Minister of Mines), had to come up from Dakar to help the campaign because they are doing so badly here. Awa Ndiaye (the Minister for Families) is here all the time, and she's having problems in her own district." According to Mbaye, Minister Ngom has been a city counselor for 12 years but has not attended one meeting of the council.
(Note: In 2002 the LD and the PDS were coalition partners, before LD

leader Abdoulaye Bathilly fell out with President Abdoulaye Wade. It was Mbaye's delivery of her neighborhood that allowed SOPI to win, paving the way for Ousmane Masseck Ndiaye to become Mayor of St Louis. End Note)

15. (SBU) Cheikh Bamba Dieye said that if the elections are held in a free and fair manner he should become the next Mayor of St Louis but, "They're bribing everybody with money, food, land, whatever you can think of. Despite that, I think we have a really good shot here. Our informal polling indicates that SOPI is running in third place behind us and Braya." During a campaign tour at a local fish market, Poloff observed that Dieye is an enthusiastic campaigner and that citizens were very excited to hear what he had to say. A female fish vendor reflected the general reception he got by telling him, "I like the fact that you care to come and listen to us; the others drive by without deigning to stop or say hi." Dieye was followed by a large retinue and loud music, creating a party atmosphere that got the crowds going. In short speeches he attacked the Mayor for doing nothing and showed his family ties in Saint Louis, "As the son of Ablaye Dieye (Note: A well-known local politician. End Note), you are putting your future in the hands of someone you know." He went on to use Koranic verses to show that he is religious and well-versed in Muslim studies, which is still a plus in Saint Louis where a traditional Islamic education is highly valued.

16. (SBU) In contrast to Dieye's campaign, the SOPI headquarters looked forlorn. Poloff was invited to join Mayor Ndiaye and Minister Awa Ndiaye to observe a strategy session. During this session both Ministers looked bored while supporters complained that neither leaders had visited their districts and that they did not have enough money to buy T-shirts and posters. When Mayor Ndiaye learned from Poloff that Benno's Dieye had received a tumultuous welcome at a local market he told an aide, in Wolof, that he too wanted to go to a market immediately. In response the aide seemed

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to balk at the idea of doing such an event without ample preparation.

Kebemer - Lackluster

17. (SBU) Campaigning in President Abdoulaye Wade's hometown of Kebemer was decidedly lackluster as the opposition has virtually ceded this city to SOPI. The Mayor of the city is the spritely 83 year old Ali Kebe, a classmate of Wade's whom the President imposed upon the city. The only interesting aspect of this election is whether or not a younger generation of local politicians, led by deputy Mayor and former IV alum Kalipha Mboup, can persuade Kebe to step aside to allow Mboup to succeed him.

18. (SBU) During a campaign tour Mboup was widely recognized and showed a solid grasp of pressing local issues while touting a plan to create city-wide "citizen's councils" to boost the interaction between citizens and the municipality. In answer to a pointed question by a young man about jobs Mboup said, "I'm not here to offer you jobs. If anybody comes here and tells you that the Mayor can give you jobs they're lying. The responsibility of the municipality is to create the environment to attract investments that create jobs, not to give people jobs that we don't have." Mboup confided that they had received very little money to campaign with and that overall budget support from the state to local municipalities had been slashed from CFA 8 billion in 2008 to CFA 6 billion in 2009. This lack of financing was clearly visible throughout the city as there was not one single piece of campaign paraphernalia to be seen anywhere.

Louga - Where is SOPI?

19. (SBU) Louga, the hometown of former President Abdou Diouf, has long been a thorn in the side of current President Wade. The opposition there is led by the fierce Aminata Mbengue Ndiaye who is also the leader of the Socialist Party's Women's group. Mbengue is personally financing the opposition Benno Siggil Senegal's campaign

in Louga and is in total control of the twenty or so opposition parties that make up her motley coalition. Despite running a low-key campaign, she is confident of victory but is clearly worried that SOPI will resort to nefarious maneuvers to steal the election.

According to her, young people have been persuaded to sell their electoral cards for around CFA 5000 (USD 10) while SOPI is going around delivering cooking oil, rice and other quotidian staples to buy people's votes. One of Mbengue's colleagues claimed, "We have infiltrated SOPI and there are areas where they will not set foot because they know we will be on the lookout, as a result they will target areas where people are less determined to protect their votes."

Red Flags for the President

¶10. (SBU) For his part, President Wade is on a thinly disguised campaign tour dubiously dubbed as an "economic tour" of the country.

In many places he has been met by red flag waving (a sign of discontent in Senegal) and stone-throwing citizens who are taking their pent up frustrations out on him. In Podor, Diourbel, Fatick, Niakhar, Bambey, Kaffrine and the suburbs of Dakar his motorcade has been stoned, resulting in broken windows and many a hasty departure by the Presidential motorcade. During a stop in St Louis he did no public campaigning, instead preferring to stay ensconced in his hotel meeting with local leaders.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Despite being local, the stakes of these elections have national implications for both coalitions. If SOPI were to lose significant ground, Wade's plan to manage his succession becomes that much harder as the opposition will present any loss as a reflection of the president's unpopularity. For Benno, this is a major opportunity to show that they are a legitimate opposition with political muscle. Meanwhile, individual battles up and down the country such as the one in St Louis make this election much more intriguing, especially in light of Wade's threat that whoever loses in his coalition will be at the sharp end of a political guillotine.

Overarching these calculations are the twin specters of fraud and money. Clearly, SOPI is hoping that it can buy victory while Benno has promised a harsh and violent response to any inklings of fraud.
End comment.